

# Editorial: Ecclesiology from California



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*David Grumett*
University of Edinburgh
*david.grumett@ed.ac.uk*

Last summer, my wife and I spent an enjoyable fortnight driving down through California from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Including mountains, desert, beach towns, coastline and urban transit systems, it was a holiday of contrasts in a state of contrasts.

Not long after our return, the Editor-in-Chief passed me a copy of the splendid collection *Theology and California*, edited by Fred Sanders and Jason Sexton.[1] The title is no mere marketing ruse. California Studies is a growing interdisciplinary field, with its own journal and contributions from a diverse range of scholars. Until now, theologians have characteristically been lagging behind colleagues in other disciplines in their engagement with this emerging research field. It would be easy to try to rectify this by jumping on a bandwagon. However, writing from a broadly evangelical perspective, Sanders, Sexton and their contributors adopt a stance that is both constructive and critical. While recognising that theology, being rooted in scripture and doctrine, cannot be derived directly from culture, they engage a range of cultural forms to produce theological insights inspired by the specific context of the Golden State.

California has a history of Christian mission that is very different from the familiar United States narrative focused on East Coast Protestantism. Although also sea-based, Californian Christianity was—as the state's schoolchildren are all taught—Spanish Catholic and specifically Franciscan. The beautiful mission churches strung up the coastline remind visitors of this fact, as do numerous place names commemorating saints. The fact of its founding by missionaries from the very well established Roman Catholic Church gave California a religious and political openness that the small, locally governed Protestant communities further East lacked. Missionaries took the lead in advocating for native populations against the gradually encroaching apparatus of Mexican political governance, giving them agricultural training and education and even placing land and resources into their ownership and control. Here we have a fitting model for mission today, including the embrace of ethnic diversity, local enabling and strong political witness. Moreover, the communities of welcome and retail that visitors to the mission churches now encounter, and even the open configuration of thee churches' indoor and garden space, point to a locally rooted and historically attuned ecclesiology from which many churches across the denominations could learn.

Despite—or perhaps because of—California's deep Christian roots, it is a place onto which many secular dreams and longings have been projected. The 1848 Gold Rush has been viewed as epitomizing the sinful desire for quick profit regardless of the social or environmental costs. At present, three years of drought combined with massive water consumption for crop irrigation have resulted in the depletion of groundwater sources that are renewed only on a geological timescale. The consumptive glamour of Hollywood continues to evoke the foundation of Los Angeles, which, unusually for the region, was not a mission but a secular town (*pueblo*). On Native American reservations, federal tribal sovereignty legislation has led to the multiplication of massive gambling complexes, which are sustained by the statistically unlikely hope of merely financial salvation. The flip side of this glitz is the omnipresent homeless populations of the large cities, failed by the healthcare system and stinking of drink and drugs. Across the iconic red towers and cables of the Golden Gate Bridge run telephones that people can call who are considering suicide. Most who reject this option jump off the eastern side, facing San Francisco.

Alongside these tragic paradoxes stand signs of human solidarity that are, at least implicitly, Christian. The University of California, which is a public university system, is unrivalled across the country for its standing and size, despite its current financial woes. The state prison population is

[1] *Theology and California: Theological Refractions on California's Culture*, eds. Fred Sanders and Jason S. Sexton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

thankfully in decline, following thirty years of meteoric growth. Among the free, a deeply embedded multi-ethnic culture brings together people of numerous nationalities and languages. A strong ethos of hospitality and welcome means that visitors are frequently very well treated. Nevertheless, the pathologies just described remind the outsider, and especially the visitor, of the danger of baptising secular narratives of providence. A realised eschatology, in which fulfilment comes to us now in present life, fails to take account of the ambiguities of human culture, and especially of Californian culture. One comes closest to earthly paradise in the temperate and sometimes surprisingly small areas of wilderness like Yosemite and the San Jacinto Mountains, the latter reached by an aerial tramway ascending like Jacob's ladder from the searing heat of Palm Springs. Native Americans chose places like these for their tribal homelands, and when in them one realises why creation narratives were frequently set in terrestrial paradises. But these are by nature small areas that could support only a limited number of people, and we return to them today only as sojourners.

Two of the contributions to Sanders's and Sexton's volume merit special note. Robert Covolo's essay on surf culture opens by juxtaposing Hawaiians taking to the waves at festivals in honour of the god Lono with the assessment of Western explorers (who were sometimes themselves believed to be this god) of the sea as a realm of chaotic disorder. This assessment was shaped by Old Testament depictions of the sea, and early missionaries viewed surfing in much the same way as sex and gambling. Indeed, the demise of surfing was even viewed as indexing the progress of Christian modesty, industry and morals. However, Covolo, who describes himself as a 'post-colonial surfer and evangelical who can trace his Reformed sentiments to an epiphany that occurred during a very pleasurable surf session at Huntingdon Cliffs', sees further. If Peter (according to Matthew) could follow Christ's command to walk on water in the tideless Sea of Galilee, it is surely possible to view the closest modern correlate of this activity in positive theological terms. From the late 1960s, 'born again' surfers began to stake a claim to the cultural territory colonised by the Beach Boys. Rejecting the notion of time as a succession of objectively quantifiable moments, which has often been associated with the Fall, they witnessed to a revived Christian idea of rest and leisure. In the surfing context, this was prompted in part by the Hawaiian notion of an 'island time' regulated according to the cyclical rhythms of nature. But a mindset shaped more by leisure than by work can equally be interpreted in Augustinian terms as bringing liberation from the distension or 'stretching out' that the soul suffers in the linear time of its estrangement from God. On the beach or while riding a wave, it can also be seen as revealing to the divine sense, or *sensus divinitatis*, that is naturally activated in believers the grandeur of creation to which John Calvin was so well attuned. Covolo's approach is far more credible than 'deep green' versions, in which surfing is presented as a complete religion in its own right, furnished with its scriptures (surf magazines), pilgrimage sites (beaches) and objects of worship (the ocean).

Another thought provoking contribution is by Bruce Baker. Drawing on the biblical motifs of exodus and relocation to a promised land, Baker reflects on how Silicon Valley entrepreneurs travelled to the West as refugees from an enslaving East Coast corporate culture in search of new leadership and behavioural norms. The temporary, shifting configurations of office space, and the mobile working practices that are now succeeding these, are the modern equivalents of the tents of the Israelites, indicating people still on the move—even if the imagery used early on to portray Silicon Valley was more apricot, cherry and almond blossom than agricultural products like milk and honey. Two other theological ideas are central to understanding Silicon Valley. The first is creativity. Bill Hewlett and David Packard founded their audio technology company in the late 1930s in a rental garage in Palo Alto. It is now a multibillion dollar global corporation. Baker convincingly argues that incredible successes like this are best understood via a theology of creativity. In the Old Testament, humans are made in the divine image and their own craftsmanship is, in turn, viewed as a response to God's command and as evidence of God's Spirit at work in the world. Importantly, in startups the profit motive does not rule. Rather, creative energy is invested in a focused way into inventive problem-solving that produces items of use to the wider human community. The other theological idea important to understanding the success of Silicon Valley is failure. In a creative and risk-taking

culture, ideas do not always fly. If the only permitted outcome is success, the fear of failure is likely to place severe limits on longer-term gains. This fear is widespread in business and other types of institution, and the corollary of Max Weber's idea of a 'Protestant ethic' of hard and productive work impelled by the belief that success signifies divine blessing and even election. However, many venture capitalists will not consider investing in an entrepreneur without evidence of previous failure.

Work like Covolo's and Baker's contests the tiresome earnestness of much practical theology, advancing without fear into areas of life and culture that lack the predictable and comforting parameters provided by many pastoral contexts. Nevertheless, their analyses have implications for churches. Covolo's powerful fusion of religion, history, scripture and doctrine is the product of a methodology that churches could apply to a wide range of particular local contexts. The implications of Baker's identification of change and creativity as the drivers of institutional growth are, for churches, more ambiguous. In order to promote these, churches must recognise the contingency of their current institutional forms and reconnect with their own wellsprings of energy and creativity, such as prayer, worship and theology, rather than fall back on bureaucratic forms of management and monitoring. However, the experience of Silicon Valley suggests that some churches must be allowed to fail while others bubble up as fresh expressions. If the wider Church is to incorporate the latter, its structures will need to evolve. The Church needs to go to those places where spiritual energy and creativity are in reality being manifested, whether the beach or the startup.

The impression of a place gained by a visitor is not as incomplete as sometimes claimed. Those visiting our own localities see things we take for granted. However, from a theological viewpoint the perspective of visitors reveals more. They are within a foreign country but temporarily, and do not wish to make it their home. The itineracy of the visitor points to a journeying and ultimate restlessness that many spiritual writers have described as their experience of present earthly life. Whether Sanders and Sexton, who both live in California, will be open to a visitor perspective remains to be seen. In any case, more is to come, as their volume is the first instalment of a larger project on Theological Engagement with California's Culture (TECC). Numbers, if nothing else, justify this project. The state's current population is about 39 million people, which equals that of Germany around 1870 and is barely less than that of France until as late as the Second World War. Given it is widely accepted that each of these states possesses a national theology, it seems likely that California does too.